P.T. gen. info
1 of 3 SCS

128

Temple Trouble

In the poor-black Fillmore district of San Francisco, the Rev. Jim Jones is revered as a good Samaritan with patrons in very high places. As pastor of the People's Temple, one of the largest interfaith churches in California, Jones not only claims God's power to heal the sick but also wields palpable clout among city and state political leaders. The governor, lieutenant governor, mayor, sheriff and district attorney have all visited the temple and, during the 1976 Presidential campaign, Jones himself shared a platform with Rosalynn Carter. Last December, the charismatic preacher who can muster black voters was named chairman of the San Francisco Housing Authority Commission by Mayor George Moscone. But now Jones stands accused by 30 former temple members of building his power through fear, fraud, physical beatings, the appropriation of parishioners' property and possible misuse of government funds.

Richard Beeson—New West

The accusations were published in two August issues of New West magazine, which called for an investigation of the temple's financial and disciplinary practices. Church representatives promptly denied the charges. But in a pair of surprise moves last week, Jones resigned from the Housing Authority and District Attorney Joseph Freitas announced that he would look into the accusations.

Colony: No one has yet filed a formal complaint against Jones, who temple officials said was unreachable at the church's 27,000-acre South American farm colony in Guyana. The city's most powerful politicians still seem solidly behind the controversial minister. Mayor Moscone has said he saw no evidence that Jones had broken any laws and, in a recent Sunday-morning sermon at the temple, black state Assemblyman Willie Brown labeled the attacks "a measure of [the church's] effectiveness."

Jones preaches a religious socialism that he himself, it appears, is the first to practice. His church, which claims 20,000 members statewide, sponsors a drug-rehabilitation program, a free restaurant and medical clinic and a legal-aid service. More radically, Jones encourages his flock to give up their private property and live in low-rent apartments leased by the church from the city. Jones and his wife live modestly above the temple, where they are raising a multiracial family of seven adopted children plus their own son. But his social activism also is expressed as politics, and on Election Day, the poor deliver for their leader. In two recent close races for mayor and district attorney, Jones's regimented followers were considered important to the winners.

According to some former church members, however, Jones's power is based as much on fear and fraud as on faith. His services are often held behind locked doors, and even then Jones is protected by bodyguards. The breakaway parishioners described ritual beatings and humiliating group encounters held at all-night sessions. A former secretary to Jones reported that the preacher faked healings by displaying chicken guts as tissue he had miraculously removed from cancer patients. Others said they had been persuaded into deeding over their homes to the church and had been talked into giving the temple government funds they received for running foster-care homes.

Jones (inset), Klan drama: 'That's why people turned over all they had'

When New West first considered investigating the People's Temple, the editors were barraged with pleas from politicians and businessmen to kill the story. When the editors persisted, some were harassed at home by anonymous callers. Meanwhile, other local newsmen reported similar coercion and only when word of the pressure campaign appeared in a local newspaper column did ex-members of the temple volunteer to tell of their experiences.

In separate interviews with NEWSWEEK, former followers of Jones corroborated the New West report. Micki Touchette, 26, told how she and eleven other students slept in a crowded garage and were given a weekly dole of $2 each as members of a temple commune. Touchette, who is white, said that Jones, who is part American Indian, told them "how ugly and horrible it was to be white," and "not to have sex because we were all latent homosexuals."

KKK: Laura Cornelius, 52, a black woman, said that Jones promised his followers a haven in Guyana when, as he predicted, Fascists took over the U.S. "He said they had a plan to exterminate blacks like they did the Jews," Cornelius recalled. She also described a ritual by temple members that dramatized a Ku Klux Klan lynching. "That's why people turned over all they had," she said. "He told us the whites would take it."

Others reported threats against their lives if they dared talk to police and said that they had been made to sign false confessions to crimes such as conspiracy against the government. "Jim always said he had an in with the police," said Deanna Myrtle, 38, "so we thought going to the police would be suicide."

Church officials have issued statements countercharging that some of the dissenters were terrorists and child molesters. Throughout the controversy, Jones has remained at the Guyana farm, which the church says it funds with $150,000 annually. And some suspect that the Rev. Mr. Jones may be the first to take up permanent asylum in the Guyana haven.

—KENNETH L. WOODWARD with MARK WHITAKER and STEPHEN GAYLE in San Francisco